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Mafia figure takes 5th as JFK hearings open

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WASHINGTON — Underworld figure Santo Trafficante Jr., appearing under subpoena, took the Fifth Amendment yesterday as the first witness in the congressional investigation of the murder of President John F. Kennedy.

Trafficante, a short, stocky man with a sagging face and a sallow complexion, was one of three Mafia men reportedly hired by the CIA to kill Cuban Premier Fidel Castro in 1960.

He is the only one of the three who has not been murdered — a factor that weighed heavily against any real hope that he might give evidence to support a theory that Kennedy's assassination was plotted by Cuban agents in retaliation for the CIA murder schemes.

Trafficante responded somberly to 13 questions put to him yesterday with a sentence that his lawyer, Henry Gonzalez of Miami and Tampa, had prepared for him:

"I refuse to answer that question pursuant to my constitutional rights under the First, Fourth, Fifth and Fourteenth amendments."

Trafficante, once the boss of syndicate gambling in Cuba, maintains homes in Tampa and North Miami. The lawyer is no relation to Rep. Henry Gonzalez (D., Tex.). who resigned last week as chairman of the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

The committee's chief counsel, former Philadelphia First Assistant District Attorney Richard Sprague, wanted to know whether Trafficante had a CIA contract, whether he knew in advance that Kennedy would be killed,and whether he met with CIA officials to discuss assassinations of Castro or other world leaders.

Sprague also asked Trafficante whether he knew Jack Ruby, Sam Giancana, Johnny Roselli or Robert Maheu, and whether he was visited by Ruby while Trafficante was in prison in Cuba. Trafficante was imprisoned in Cuba for a short time after the Castro revolution in 1959.

Ruby was the killer of Lee Harvey Oswald, named by the Warren Commission at the sole murderer of Kennedy.

Richard Sprague
questions witness

Giancana, a Chicago crime syndicate boss, his West Coast lieutenant Roselli and Trafficante reportedly were recruited in the CIA anti-Castro plot by Maheu, a former FBI agent and later a key aide to millionaire Howard Hughes.

The Senate Intelligence Committee reported in 1975 that the CIA had instigated at least eight plots against Castro. Some of the schemes discussed were to treat his cigars with a disorienting agent before a speech, to poison his food in his favorite Havana restaurant and to dust his shoes with a substance that would make his beard fall out and thus kill his charisma.

Giancana was shot to death June 20, 1975, in his home in suburban Chicago shortly after Senate committee staff members began trying to contact him. Roselli testified five days later. His hacked-up body was found last July floating in an oil drum near Miami.

Trafficante, 61, a dapper figure in a vested gray suit, refused to tell the House committee whether his life had been threatened.

He also failed to produce any of the documents subpoenaed by Sprague. The committee's chief counsel had sought written material related to various anti-Castro groups and to Trafficante's imprisonment in Cuba.

At Trafficante's request, Rep. Louis Stokes (D., Ohio), the committee chairman, ordered television cameras and radio microphones removed from the hearing room before any questions were asked.

Stokes excused Trafficante after warning him that he could be cited for contempt of Congress.

The committee is hoping to convince the full House to keep the investigation going after its current authorization runs out March 31. For months, the committee's work was crippled by a feud between Sprague and Rep. Gonzalez.

"I don't think this (Trafficante's refusal to talk) sets us back," Stokes said. "This is only one of many facets of the investigation."

Stokes said that the committee had subpoenaed records pertaining to the assassination of the civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from officials in Memphis, Tenn., and Birmingham, Ala. James Earl Ray, serving a 99-year-term for King's murder, will give preliminary depositions to the committee next week, his attorney, Jack Kershaw, said yesterday in Nashville, Tenn.